

The Introspective Sponger: *Hamlet* in the Poetry of Bertolt Brecht

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Bertolt Brecht has been described as “one of [the] most perceptive Shakespeare critics” of our time (Heinemann 228), not only for his critical essays on the English playwright’s production, but more interestingly, because of his metatextual works,¹ that is to say critical readings in the form of new works, mainly poems.² As concerns *Hamlet*, Brecht’s poetry includes a sonnet devoted to its interpretation, entitled “Über Shakespeares Stück *Hamlet*” [“On Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*”] (1940), as well as an earlier one, useful to understanding Brecht’s view of the play, called “Sonett vom Sieger” [“Sonnet of the victor”] (1926), which might be seen as an expansion of Act 4, Scene 4.³ In these poems, the values traditionally associated with hesitancy and action are reversed and Hamlet’s eventual pursuit of revenge is re-interpreted as a sign that he is capable of the brutality needed for kingship in a feudal age. This article will examine the nature and function of the metatextual and intertextual relationships between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Brecht’s anti-war sonnets, focusing chiefly on his 1940 sonnet. It will examine both the coherent parts of the contemporary critical discourse on *Hamlet* and the challenging examples of “the fascination” which lies in the multifaceted “relationship between modern poets and Shakespeare” (Corcoran 3).

Neil Corcoran’s recent book on Shakespeare and English modern poets highlights that Harold Bloom puts “Shakespeare at the origin of influential anxiety” and that for poets writing in English, Shakespeare “must seem in all sorts of ways the most anxiety-inducing of all” (Corcoran 2–3). Basically, the same was stated by Roger Paulin for writers writing in German when he described German culture as “in Harold Bloom’s terms, a ‘Shakespeare-haunted’ culture” (1). As early as 1773, the German writer Christoph Martin Wieland described himself and his contemporary colleagues in Germany as haunted by Shakespeare’s ghost, as Hamlet was haunted by his father’s ghost, in an essay indicatively entitled *Der Geist Shakespeares* [*Shakespeare’s Ghost*] (119). It is well-known that the history of the German reception of Shakespeare represents a particular kind of literary reception, since it features a case of appropriation by the receiving culture. In Germany, Shakespeare is considered a timeless classic, as Goethe or Schiller are. This

¹For the notion of metatextuality see Genette (1–7).

²On Brecht’s poetry and the critical esteem in which it is held see Kuhn and Leeder.

³For the notion of expansion see Genette (260).

phenomenon, which Franz Dingelstedt named “Nostrifizierung” [nostrification] in 1858 (5), is due to the fact that German unification occurred relatively late, in 1871, and before achieving political unity the people of the German-speaking areas had achieved a cultural unity in which Shakespeare played an essential role (Bate 12; Leerssen 42). Indeed, during the *Sturm und Drang* and Romantic periods, when German nationalist movements raised and established themselves respectively, there was a strong need for a German national literature and theatre, which could work as a socio-cultural catalyst. In this context, Shakespeare’s works helped this process of defining a German cultural identity and the cognate development of a German national drama. This is the reason why, in Paulin’s words, “Shakespeare, for good or ill, is identified with national aspirations, the creation of a national literary canon, and the mythology of a German national literature” (1).⁴ As a consequence, whenever in the history of Germany national identity has been challenged, be it by the German revolution of 1918–19, or by Hitler and Nazism from 1933 on, or by the postwar division of Germany, or by the student movement of 1968, or by re-unification in 1990, that is to say in situations in which “redefining the meaning of the classical canon was tantamount to changing attitudes and values—an eminently political act” (Hortmann xviii), Shakespeare’s plays were at the core of this cultural struggle, his *Hamlet* in particular, maybe because the play itself features the themes of identity and self-definition.⁵

In Brecht’s long and extremely productive career, Shakespeare was only one of the many authors he confronted. Brecht was a prolific writer who tried his hand in virtually every genre, from essay writing to poetry, from prose to drama, and he was particularly interested in adapting and rewriting works of other writers, such as Gay, Dante, Kipling, Marlowe, Verlaine or Rimbaud; he did not always declare his borrowings (see Beckley). That is why he has been defined as “the most notorious appropriator of other men’s art in the twentieth century” (Michael 144). His entire production stands in a dialectical relationship with tradition, as well as with Shakespeare (Rouse), since he thought that classics must not be treated as museum pieces, but must be read through a new lens, in order to maintain their original power and retain their social functionality in contexts different from those

⁴The following are just some examples: Nicolai’s (1755) and Lessing’s (1759) letters on German contemporary literature, in which they speak of English literature, and of Shakespeare in particular, as models to be followed by the German people to achieve a national literature; A. W. Schlegel’s lessons on drama read in Vienna in 1808, in which he hailed the freedom of form of Shakespeare’s plays to refer indirectly to the need for political autonomy for the Prussian people, at that time under the threat of Napoleon’s power; or Albert Cohn’s statement in his pioneering study of Shakespeare in Germany (1865): “So completely has Shakespeare become for us the representative, the Alpha and Omega, of the modern drama, that we are accustomed to regard the works of all ages in this department of literature, mainly with reference to him alone” (1). The most eloquent example is perhaps Friedrich Gundolf’s *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* [Shakespeare and the German Spirit] (1911), in which the authentic interpreters of the English playwright are said to be the German ones. The literature on this topic is extremely wide. See Bate, Habicht, Zimmermann, Puschmann-Nalenz, Moninger, Weimann, Ledebur and Leerssen, among others.

⁵Manfred Pfister covered the topic well in the following essays: “Germany is Hamlet”, “Hamlet und der deutsche Geist” [Hamlet and the German Spirit] and “Hamlets made in Germany”.

in which they were written (Brecht 127). Nonetheless, one can recognise three different attitudes towards tradition, corresponding to three phases of Brecht's biography.⁶

In the roaring twenties, spent in Berlin, Brecht looked at the classics as material that needed to be reshaped provokingly. From the late twenties, this approach was accentuated because of the influence of Marxism, a philosophy and outlook on life he learnt and espoused through the mediation of the unorthodox Marxist Karl Korsch (1886–1961).⁷ During his exile, between 1933 and 1945, Brecht felt a moral duty to re-read the tradition which had not been able to prevent the barbarism of the war and the racial extermination he was witnessing (Buono 53). In this long period—when he was distraught with the menace of a *damnatio memoriae* and tried to write an epic of his exile—,⁸ he particularly dealt with the classics. By studying them in depth and polishing his theories on the dialectical attitude towards tradition, Brecht's aesthetic plan was part of a political target to change society by representing human beings and the world they live in as mutable entities. It was only after the Second World War, however, that Brecht could realise his ideas.

With regard to Shakespeare, since he is crucial in the history and development of the German theatre, if Brecht wanted to fulfill his project of leading German drama in the direction of anti-Aristotelian drama and thus re-found it, he had to begin from its foundations, that is to say with Shakespeare, adapting and interpreting his plays.⁹ More precisely, Brecht found it necessary to change the traditional German interpretations of Shakespearean plays because, as the Brecht scholar Antony Tatlow stated in his book on Shakespearean intercultural readings, excessive attention to the central characters may have serious consequences for the plays' interpretations, since it “affects the dynamics of the plays, encouraging us to take them out of history into the perennial present of the isolated, larger than life, romantic individual” (154). Against this, the German dramatist proposed to shift the focus onto the historical, social and political aspects of the plays. In this respect, the case of *Hamlet* is paradigmatic. Brecht developed his Marxist idea of the story against both Hamlet's Romantic icon and the Nazi idea that Hamlet's heroism corresponds to daring in war. Indeed, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Goethe idealised Shakespeare's Hamlet with his Romantic interpretation of the character

⁶On this topic see Symington *Brecht und Shakespeare*, and Baum.

⁷On this topic see Kellner, and Rasch.

⁸During his exile, Brecht built up his own canon of the literature of exile, which included Shakespeare as a subject of James I, and auto-canonised himself. On this topic see Krabiel, Kuhn, Leeder, Phelan and Vogt.

⁹In 1949, Eric Bentley wrote, “It has even been suggested that Brecht will translate Shakespeare; perhaps he could not remake the German theatre, as he wishes to do, without translating Shakespeare, who is, after all, the leading German dramatist. Up to now Shakespeare has been the dramatist of German romanticism, which means that of late he has become a somewhat academic figure, a Walter Scott of the stage. Brecht would give us a very modern Shakespeare, doubtless; the hope would be that the modern style would contain more of the original Elizabethan spirit than the romantic style did. The theater of Narrative Realism [. . .] has more in common with the great theater of the remoter past than with the theater of today and yesterday” (Bentley 160).

as a “delicate Renaissance prince shattered by the barbaric task imposed on him” (Hortmann 90). According to this influential reading of the character, Hamlet was conceived as a sort of young Werther.¹⁰

In the nineteenth century, the image of the thoughtful hero unable to act was charged with political meaning. The poem by Ferdinand Freiligrath, “Deutschland ist Hamlet!” [“Germany is Hamlet!”] (1844), is emblematic of this widespread reception, which involves pieces of literature, as well as literary criticism and philosophical treatises (Paulin 442). Freiligrath’s poem reads:

Deutschland ist Hamlet! Ernst und stumm
In seinen Toren jede Nacht
Geht die begrabne Freiheit um,
Und winkt den Männern auf der Wacht.
Da steht die Hohe, blank bewehrt,
Und sagt dem Zaudrer, der noch zweifelt:
“Sei mir ein Rächer, zieh dein Schwert!
Man hat mir Gift ins Ohr geträufelt!”
[. . .]
Ob er es wirklich endlich wagt?
Er sinnt und träumt und weiß nicht Rat;
Kein Mittel, das die Brust ihm stähle!
Zu einer frischen, mut’gen Tat
Fehlt ihm die frische, mut’ge Seele!
Das macht, er hat zu viel gehockt;
Er lag und las zu viel im Bett.
Er wurde, weil das Blut ihm stockt’,
Zu kurz von Atem und zu fett.
Er spann zu viel gelehrten Werg,
Sein bestes Tun ist eben Denken;
Er stak zu lang in Wittenberg,
Im Hörsaal oder in den Schenken.
[. . .]
Bis endlich er die Klinge packt,
Ernst zu erfüllen seinen Schwur;
Doch ach—das ist im letzten Akt,
Und streckt ihn selbst zu Boden nur!
Bei den Erschlagenen, die sein Haß
Preisgab der Schmach und dem Verderben,
Liegt er entseelt, und Fortinbras
Rückt klirrend ein, das Reich zu erben.
[. . .]
Bin ich ja selbst ein Stück von dir,
Du ew’ger Zauderer und Säumer!
(Freiligrath 71–73)

¹⁰In his *Wilhelm Meister* of 1796, Goethe described Hamlet as “A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away” (Bate 2).

[Yes, Germany is Hamlet! Lo!
Upon her ramparts every night
There stalks in silence, grim and slow
Her buried Freedom's steel-clad sprite,
Beck'ning the warders watching there,
And to the shrinking doubter saying:
"They've dropt fell poison in my ear,
Draw thou the sword, no more delaying!"
[. . .]
But will he really ever dare?
He ponders, dreams, but at his need
No counsel comes, firm purpose granting,
Still for the prompt courageous soul is wanting!
It comes from loitering overmuch,
Lounging, and reading,—tired to death:
Sloth holds him in its iron clutch,
He's grown too fat and scant of breath.
His learning gives him little aid,
His boldest act is only thinking;
Too long in Wittenberg he stayed
Attending lectures, may be, drinking.
[. . .]
At last he gets the courage lacked,
He grasps the sword to keep his vow,—
But ah! 'tis in the final Act,
And only serves to lay him low.
With those his hate has overcome,
Scouring at last their black demerits,
He dies,—and then with tuck of drum
Comes Fortinbras, and all inherits.
[. . .]
I am myself a part of you,
You eternal temporizer and hesitator!]
(Paulin 443–44)

Through the allusion to Hamlet's features and story, Freiligrath complains about German politics. More specifically, he compares Hamlet's father with German freedom, Claudius with Metternich, and the deadly poison with Metternich's political restoration, which began in 1815. Hamlet, in turn, is compared with German liberal intellectuals whose reasoning and studying are described as harmful habits. From Freiligrath's perspective, Hamlet becomes a hero properly only when he finally finds the courage to act, but at that point it is too late and Fortinbras takes his throne. Through these lines on Hamlet, the poet invites the German intellectuals to act by "grasping the sword" and to fight for freedom, since "thinking" is not "bold" enough. It is worth mentioning the fact that when the liberal patriotic Freiligrath wrote the poem in 1844, he was in exile because of Metternich's reactionary politics (Paulin 442).

In the 1930s, Nazi scholars turned Hamlet into “a heroic and Nordic ideal figure” (Hortmann 157), brave and ready to act, as it is well exemplified by the famous interpretation of the character made by the German actor and director Gustaf Gründgens in 1936.¹¹ This is very likely the reason why *Hamlet* was the most performed play between 1937 and 1939, even though Shakespeare’s comedies otherwise dominated the repertoire due to the general escapism sought by people in those years.¹² As Michael Dobson wrote in an article on the topic, “the Nazis believed Germany had to shake off the role of Hamlet in favour of becoming Fortinbras, freeing the national spirit from Shakespearean tragedy in the process”. It is useful to quote Dobson’s article further, when it cites a speech delivered by Hermann Burte to a writers’ congress in Weimar in 1940:

Just as the remarkable poetry of the Elizabethans arose from victory over the Spanish Armada, so [. . .] will a new poetry arise from our victory. [. . .] The future poet will [. . .] be nourished to a loftier life-content and a stronger poetical power by the mighty manner and the extraordinary work of Adolf Hitler, as Goethe was by the deeds of Frederick the Great. He will not be a Hamlet who flees from himself, because he will set aright the times that are out of joint! [. . .] For through the deeds of the *Führer* the Fatherland will be so transformed that neither the ruler nor the poet will be tragic figures!

Opposing first the Romantic and then the Nazi reading of Shakespeare’s Hamlet was evidently felt by Brecht to be a vital necessity for his homeland’s culture. *Hamlet* is, with the exception of *Coriolanus*, the most quoted, discussed and re-worked Shakespeare play in Brecht’s wide production over his whole career. Besides scattered references to *Hamlet* in his theoretical writings, in 1931 Brecht wrote his own adaptation of *Hamlet* for Berlin Radio, but unfortunately we only have a few parts of it. Furthermore, in 1939 the German dramatist wrote a little parallel scene, meant to be a rehearsal exercise for actors playing *Hamlet*. Finally, he condensed his own challenging interpretation of the play into the brief and evocative form of the sonnet “Über Shakespeares Stück *Hamlet*”. It is part of a poem collection called *Studien* [*Studies*] (1940), in which, as this title suggests,¹³ Brecht interprets literary works, giving alternative and critical readings of eight great classics, without impairing their aesthetic pleasure, blaming both literary works written in praise of somebody and literary reception which idealises characters (Knopf 313–22).¹⁴

¹¹There are more examples of strong and courageous Hamlets on the German stage in 1934: Hans König in Weimar, Peter Stanchina in Leipzig and Karlsruhe, or Willy Birgel in Mannheim (Hortmann 157).

¹²On this topic see Symington *The Nazi Appropriation of Shakespeare*.

¹³The metatextual and scientific-experimental functions (Barbon 1412) of the poems included in this collection are suggested also by their single titles, which bear the preposition *über*, the German for the Latin *de*, typical of European essay writing.

¹⁴In this collection, Dante as Beatrice’s lover is together with Shakespeare’s Hamlet one of his targets (see Montironi). In “Über die Gedichte des Dante auf die Beatrice” [“On Dante’s poems to Beatrice”], the Italian poet is blamed for being responsible for a literary tradition in which pla-

The form used by Brecht in this process is the sonnet. By using one of the most noble forms of the classical heredity, in order to disrupt it, Brecht wanted to give an ironic demonstration of the formalism of Lukàcs's definition of Realism, proving that the point in literature is not the form itself, but how and for what ends the form is used.¹⁵ The poem on *Hamlet* reads:

In diesem Korpus, træg und aufgeschwemmt
Sagt sich Vernunft als böse Krankheit an
Denn wehrlos unter strahlgeschientem Clan
Steht der tiefsinnige Parasit im Hemd.
Bis sie ihn dann die Trommel hören lassen
Die Fortinbras den tausend Narren rührt
Die er zum Krieg um jenes Ländchen führt
"Zu klein, um ihre Leichen ganz zu fassen."
Erst jetzt gelingt's dem Dicken, rot zu sehn.
Es wird im klar, er hat genug geschwankt.
Nun heißt's, zu (blutigen) Taten übergehn.
So daß man finster nickt, wenn man erfährt
"Er hätte sich, wär er hinaufgelangt
Unbefehlbar noch höchst königlich bewährt."

[Here is the body, puffy and inert,
Where we can trace the virus of the mind.
How lost¹⁶ he seems among his steel-clad kind
This introspective sponger in a shirt.
Till they bring drums to wake him up again
As Fortinbras and all the fools he's found
March off to battle for that little patch of ground
"Which is not tomb enough to hide the slain."
At that his too, too solid flesh sees red.
He feels he's hesitated long enough.
It's time to turn to (bloody) deeds instead.
So we nod grimly when the play is done
And one hears that "he was of the stuff
To prove most royally, had he been put on".]
(Brecht *Poems* 321, trans. Willett)

tonic love is praised more than physical love, although concretely more important (Joost 221–24). Furthermore, in "Sonett zu Dantes 'Hölle der Abgeschiedenen'" ["Sonnet on Dante's 'Hell for the Departed'"], Paolo and Francesca, the famous carnal lovers of the *Divine Comedy*, punished in Hell for their lechery, are relieved by the news given by Brecht that private property exists no more. And since any lover can be said to be his or her lover's "property", their love is no longer forbidden and they cannot be punished. It must be said that, despite his parody, in these poems Brecht hints at the aesthetic value of the classics. As Hannah Arendt once noted, he is not against classical poets, but "against the classicist" (Whall 133).

¹⁵On Brecht, Lukàcs and the Expressionism debate see Jameson (133–47).

¹⁶The adjective "lost" does not convey all the shades of meaning conveyed by the German "wehrlos", which means defenceless, helpless, unprotected.

Brecht begins the poem with a physical-psychological description of the character, which corresponds to the traditional one. As Freiligrath's Hamlet is fat and asthmatic, lying in his bed, Brecht's Hamlet is slothful, fat and shabby. Through the contradictory pairs reason/sickness and profound/parasite, Brecht stigmatises Hamlet as a sponger whose harm, defined as a "virus of the mind", is that he has an introspective attitude towards life. The next two stanzas follow the tradition again and report what is usually accounted as the positive, heroic awakening of Hamlet: after hearing of Fortinbras's army, Hamlet decides to act. However, at the end of the poem, contrary to tradition, Brecht criticises this point. As in a medieval ballad, we understand Brecht's perspective only at the end, where the truth is revealed and Brecht defines Hamlet's ending as grim because of Fortinbras's final words. This ending is quite open. One can say that the idea of Hamlet as a king does not convince Brecht, who "nods grimly" at it. In addition, one can infer that the idea of Fortinbras as a king does not convince Brecht, since, again, he "nods grimly" at his words.¹⁷

To put this argument forward it is necessary to link the sonnet lines to Brecht's other works and writings on *Hamlet*. First of all, I shall focus on the expression "(bloody) deeds". They show that Hamlet is negative because of his bloody deeds. Brecht was interested in the dialectical nature of Shakespeare's works, which, according to the German writer, was due not only to the formal features of his theatre, but also to its peculiar situation in history. Influenced by the theories of the sociologist Fritz Sternberg (1895–1963), Brecht interpreted the Elizabethan era as a suspended time between the feudal worldview belonging to the past and the rational-individualist one belonging to the future (Heinemann 240–02). Thus Brecht historicises the character of Hamlet and the actions in which he is involved. His tragedy derives from the fact that he is caught between duty to pursue a feudal revenge and his incapability of finding a way to act according to the new thinking, based on reason and conscience. He has learned this new way of thinking at the Protestant University of Wittenberg, even if he is not able to behave according to the new principles, since he is overwhelmed by the old feudal values, represented in the play by the figure of Hecuba in Act 2, Scene 2. At the end, Hamlet chooses the medieval perspective, turning to bloody actions. Brecht underlines this particular through the use of brackets, an unpoetic sign in a sonnet.

When Brecht's adaption of *Hamlet* for Berlin Radio was broadcast in 1931, directed by Alfred Braun, the playwright introduced the play by describing it as

a play of medieval drama, revolving around
Deeds, which are murderous, bloody, unnatural,
Chance judgments, blind murder,

¹⁷It is worth mentioning the fact that Brecht may ironically refer here to Gerhart Hauptmann's famous readings of *Hamlet*. Starting, as he himself stated, "from Fortinbras's judgement that 'he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royal'" (Hortmann 91), Hauptmann wrote two adaptations of *Hamlet* (1927, 1930), a new play called *Hamlet in Wittenberg* (1935) and a *Hamlet*-novel entitled *Im Wirbel der Berufung* (1936), through which he tried to give a positive interpretation of Hamlet as a wilful and capable man.

Around killed people, plans made with
Violence and cunning, which fail and hit back
Their inventor's head.

(qtd. in Symington 97)

Brecht underlines the medieval elements of the tragedy and wants his contemporary audience to see them with horror, since they are unnatural and inhuman. At the conclusion of this radio adaptation, the German playwright stresses his point. He highlights the fact that it is for the casual hearing of battle drums that Hamlet

butchers, finally overcoming
His so human and reasonable hesitation,
Sized in a horrifying killing fury,
The king, his mother, and himself.

(qtd. in Symington 97)

As Symington suggests in his analysis of the radio-adaptation, in these last lines we have Brecht's critique and also his great disappointment towards Hamlet: the student of Wittenberg, who had been guided by reason till the chance encounter with Fortinbras's army, behaved, after all, as a feudal warrior (98). This point leads us to the second important line in the sonnet, the fifth line: "Till they bring drums to wake him up again". These words show that Hamlet is condemnable because he did bloody deeds by chance and unreasonably. Brecht found Act 4, Scene 4—the chance encounter with Fortinbras's army—central in the play, since Hamlet is shown as taken by an irrational impulse to kill. It was the sound of battle drums that bewitched him as music and drove him to act improperly (Kussmaul 67). In his writings Brecht is polemic about the fact that this scene has often been eliminated in German theatre adaptations of the play with, according to him, tragic consequences.

Brecht found this scene important because in it one can see that Hamlet destroyed in a moment what he had elaborated in years of learning. As concerns this point, it is useful to quote a little parallel scene written by Brecht in 1939 for actors as a practice exercise to make them understand the importance of this scene. It is included in a collection called *Übungsstücke für Schauspieler* [*Practice scenes for actors*]. Brecht imagines a counterpart to Hamlet's chance encounter with Fortinbras's army: if the encounter with Fortinbras represents the heroism of feudal times, that is to say acting for honour, the encounter imagined by Brecht represents the heroism of modern times, that is to say acting by reason. Here is the scene as described by Heinemann:

Hamlet, on his way to England in Act IV, reaches the coast and learns from the ferryman that relations between Denmark and Norway have now been settled by a treaty, whereby Denmark gives up the piece of coastline in dispute and Norway contracts to buy Danish fish, so that a war has become unnecessary. "The new methods, friend. You find that now all over the place. Blood doesn't smell good any more. Tastes have changed". (242)

Brecht's Hamlet approves this turnabout from a feudal to a modern outlook on life. For this reason, the last lines of Brecht's sonnet show that Fortinbras cannot be a good king because he is a feudal military hero:

Fortinbras den tausend Narren rührt
Die er zum Krieg um jenes Länchen führt
"Zu klein, um ihre Leichen ganz zu fassen."

[Fortinbras and all the fools he's found
March off to battle for that little patch of ground
"Which is not tomb enough to hide the slain."]

To corroborate this point, it is worth mentioning the fact that Brecht also quoted the same lines from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—describing Fortinbras as fighting for personal glory and letting people die senselessly—in the earlier *Hamlet* poem mentioned above, "Sonett vom Sieger". Here, the narrator describes a pointless battle which brings pointless deaths. The winner of the title is the feudal hero, who distinguishes himself in fighting. He is described as someone who fought unreasonably and without control:

Wo nicht der Platz für eines Ölbaums Schatten war
Entstand ein Kampf von Männern, nicht zu zähmen
Und um ein Feldchen, allen Lebens bar
Zu klein, um ihre Leichen aufzunehmen.

Doch einer kämpfte mit ganz ohne Zweck
Unkenntlich durch Gewalt! Dem alle fluchten!
Als sich die Schlächter nachts zu retten suchten
Stand er noch kämpfend und ging lang nicht weg.

[Some men were fighting uncontrollably
Over a lifeless barren little field
To hold their carcasses it was too small
Less than the shadow of an olive-tree.

But there was one who fought unthinkingly
Transformed by violence and cursed by all!
They made for safety seeing darkness fall
But he stayed on and fought and would not yield].

(Brecht *Poems* 210, trans. Adès)

Again as in a mediaeval ballad, the ending of the poem is surprising. The warrior won everything that could be won but was finally wounded in the back. Actually, he is not a winner. Adopting this anti-war perspective, Brecht states that when Hamlet hesitates, he acts correctly, since his hesitation is due to reason. When Hamlet decides to fight and kill, he acts wrongly, since he loses the guiding principle of reason and is driven by irrationality, due to a chance encounter. Hamlet puts himself in the hands of fate, so he cannot be a hero in Brechtian terms. In the

meantime, Fortinbras, as a feudal hero, cannot be a worthy king. As Symington observed, Hamlet's crisis is for Brecht the crisis of reason (163). Hamlet is the demonstration of the fact that "the sleep of reason produces monsters", to use the title of a famous etching by Goya.

Given this interpretation, should we reject Brecht's *Hamlet* sonnet and judge it as harshly as critics judged his radio adaptation of *Hamlet*? Is Brecht's poem "thoroughly and provocatively un-Shakespearean" (Heinemann 242), or does it give an insight, however challenging, into the Shakespearean play? My answer is that Brecht's poem can be considered as a coherent and valid interpretation of *Hamlet*. Recently, Paola Pugliatti dedicated an interesting study to Shakespeare and the just war tradition. In it, *Hamlet* is described as "the play in which war, although absent as staged event, is most insistently present both as topic of discussion and as metaphor. [. . .] Although war is visually absent from the action, the pressure of the threat of war does not relent throughout the whole play" (139). Analysing the play from the perspective of war theory, Pugliatti concludes that Hamlet poses "the question of whether revenge can be a just cause for waging war" (140). Renaissance treaties condemn it. In Erasmus's *Dulce Bellum*, for example, wars of revenge against a state are compared to the condemnation of criminals in law courts. While in the case of the condemned criminal there is only one person who suffers, in a war "hundreds of innocents are unjustly harmed" (Pugliatti 141). Besides this absolute condemnation, some theorists stated that revenge war can be accepted only if it is made on the basis of a wrong unjustly inflicted. But this is not the case with Fortinbras. As Horatio explains at the beginning of the play, old Fortinbras challenged old Hamlet "prick'd on by a most emulate pride" (Act 1, Scene 1). This is a case of war for personal reasons, thus an unjust war. Since old Fortinbras lost, Horatio goes on explaining, he had to give Denmark his lands, as this is thoroughly legal and just, since it was agreed "by a seal'd compact / Well ratified by law and heraldry" (ibid.). Now young Fortinbras wants to take those lands again, even if he has no right to do so. His war is unjust, like that of his father. Moreover, Horatio adds to his explanation of the contemporary situation some telling details: Young Fortinbras is "of unimproved mettle hot and full" (ibid.). Shakespeare underlines the fact that a state of war is a state of un-reason and Brecht highlights the point in his sonnet on Hamlet .

Furthermore, to lead his unjust war Fortinbras "hath in the skirts of Norway, here and there, / Shark'd up a list of lawless resolute, / For food and diet, to some enterprise / That hath a stomach in't [. . .]" (ibid.). These words seem to echo the above quoted treaty on war, written by Erasmus. The question is underlined in the play, and not only near the end, when Hamlet hears of Fortinbras in Act 4, Scene 4, the one Brecht quotes in both his *Hamlet* sonnets. The condemnation of war as something which harms and kills people, mainly poor people, can be deduced also from the penitential punishment inflicted upon Hamlet's father in the afterlife, where the *contrappasso* [retaliation law] is applied, that is to say, as Dante told us, the punishment of souls by a process either resembling or contrasting with the sin itself. Indeed, Hamlet's father, who was a military leader, tells his son that he is

“for the day confin’d to fast in fires, / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg’d away” (Act 1, Scene 5). I would go as far as saying that these lines mean he has to starve as his soldiers did. Thus, Brecht’s modern anti-war ideas are deeply rooted in *Hamlet*, as well as his condemnation of the crisis of reason. The grim ending Brecht sees in the words spoken by Fortinbras before Hamlet’s dead body, because the future of a state led by Fortinbras will be a future of war, is rooted in Shakespeare’s text, as Barker and Pugliatti have pointed out. More precisely, at the end when Fortinbras uses kind words before Hamlet’s dead body, he is making an obliged speech of praise, and his words are clearly just a chivalric practice:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
to have prov’d most royally; and for his passage
The soldiers’ music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.
Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this
Becomes the field but here shows much amiss.
Go, bid the soldiers shoot

(Act 5, Scene 2)

As Barker suggests and Pugliatti corroborates, the military ritual which Fortinbras orders for Hamlet sounds inadequate and “invites the audience to consider that Fortinbras may well be about to establish a new order in Denmark, but it may be one framed by his own line of work. Fortinbras obviously links royalty with militarism” (Pugliatti 140).

In conclusion, we can say that Brecht’s *Hamlet* sonnets are both Brechtian and Shakespearean. They are not disrespectful and they are not modern readings imposed on the plays, thoroughly foreign to them. In Brecht’s sonnets, to quote Walter Benjamin, “unconditional homage, which corresponds to a barbarous concept of culture, has yielded to a homage full of reservations” (562, translation mine). Brecht’s sonnets can be considered insightful pieces of criticism on Shakespeare’s play. Indeed, they exemplify how fruitfully provoking the relationship between modern poets and Shakespeare can be, and they also exemplify that, as Corcoran puts it, “poets encountering Shakespeare are also profoundly encountering themselves and, occasionally, one another; and in this process too Shakespeare becomes in many ways the first modern” (3).

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